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ARTICLE

When 'Can I help you?' hurts: Roma experiences of everyday microaggressions in retail outlets

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Abstract

The concept of microaggressions alerts us how majority group members' everyday behaviour can impact minorities negatively. Recently, some researchers have questioned the criteria for identifying microaggressions and rejected the concept's utility. We maintain that attending to minorities' everyday experiences is important and illustrate this through a three-phase study with Roma in Hungary. First, we conducted interviews exploring their everyday interactional experiences (Phase 1, $N = 17$); second, Roma participants filmed (naturally occurring) interactions with majority group members (Phase 2, $N = 10$); third, we showed such filmed interactions to Roma focus groups and recorded their discussions (Phase 3, $N = 28$). Analysing these discussions, we focused on how the experience of surveillance when shopping (even when manifested in apparently helpful attention from shop assistants) impacted participants in ways that majority group members likely have little awareness of. Specifically, participants reported their need to (a) reflect on (and manage) their emotional reactions; (b) weigh a variety of strategic considerations as to how to respond; and (c) engage in in-the-moment interpretation as to the nature of the interaction. Such experiences negatively impact the use of public space and illustrate the value of adopting the minority's vantage point concerning the identification of microaggressive treatment.

KEYWORDS

microaggressions, misrecognition, Roma, shopping, surveillance

BACKGROUND

Shopping can be a tedious necessity. Yet, it can also be enjoyable. While the level of enjoyment likely depends on one's resources, it also depends on one's treatment, and in this regard, minorities often experience a poor reception (Douds & Hout, 2020; Roscigno, 2007). For example, Rusche and Brewster (2008) found that restaurant staff perceived Black American customers negatively (e.g. as unlikely to tip well), which resulted in such diners receiving poorer service. Black Americans are also more likely than Whites to experience security-related observation in retail settings (Pittman, 2020; Schreer et al., 2009) and to have to wait longer to be served (Williams et al., 2015). Such is the routine nature of these encounters that minorities often develop anticipatory strategies to forestall their occurrence. For example, Black Americans report engaging in identity performances that legitimate their presence in stores: they avoid window shopping as it might imply they are not suitably resourced customers and dress more formally to convey their purchasing capacity (Feagin, 1991; Pittman, 2020). We believe such everyday experiences need to be taken seriously. Shopping is a necessary part of life. Moreover, it is an activity in the public sphere, and encounters that problematize one's presence in such a public venue raise significant questions about the degree to which one's membership in the wider community is recognized and respected (Painter & Philo, 1995).

Here, we explore the shopping experiences of an understudied, highly marginalized community, routinely depicted as a problematic racialized Other – Roma living in Hungary. We investigate Roma participants' reports of their everyday misrecognition as potential thieves (rather than genuine customers) and the emotional, strategic and interpretative issues they engage with when shopping. A distinctive feature of our research is that it was co-produced with members of the Roma community using video materials capturing everyday Roma experiences, which were then presented to focus groups comprising Roma participants. Our analysis of these focus groups' data explores how prejudice is practiced in everyday surveillance and dissects the complex deliberations participants engage in when deciding how to respond. In doing so, we emphasize the importance of researchers taking seriously minority group members' sense making of their experiences. As we will see, even an apparently positive 'Can I help you' from a shop assistant can be experienced as a challenge to one's moral character and the legitimacy of one's presence in the store.

Addressing these issues, we draw on the literature concerning microaggressions (Sue, 2010a). Although this concept has recently been subject to criticism, we maintain much may be gained through exploring the considerations minority group members must weigh as they go about the apparently simple task of shopping. Accordingly, we argue that the concept of microaggressions does have value and, in the context of our research, is highly relevant to the micropolitics of place, belonging and citizenship (Di Masso, 2015; Painter & Philo, 1995; Tileagă, 2015).

Microaggressions

Some forms of prejudice are direct and explicit. Others are less explicit and are captured with the concept of 'microaggressions' – 'the everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely on their marginalised group membership' (Sue, 2010a, p. 1). Developing this concept, researchers have generated listings of acts (Sue et al., 2007; Williams et al., 2021) which can then be classified into broader categories, for example, microassaults, microinsults and microinvalidations (Sue et al., 2007).

In isolation, such acts may be relatively insignificant (and, if experienced by members of advantaged groups, easily dismissed). However, when experienced in combination (and cumulatively) by minority group members, they can be psychologically potent (Sue, 2010b), resulting in poorer psychological well-being (Forrest-Bank & Cuellar, 2018; Hurd et al., 2014), depression (Finch et al., 2000; Sellers et al., 2006;

Torres et al., 2010), anxiety (Williams et al., 2018), decreased self-esteem (Donovan et al., 2013) and poorer physical health (for a review, see Nadal et al., 2017). At a societal level, microaggressions reproduce stereotypes (Ong et al., 2013; Sue et al., 2007), reinforce power inequities (Salvatore & Shelton, 2007; Sue & Spanierman, 2020; Williams, 2020), facilitate the internalization of oppressive beliefs by both dominant and marginalized groups (Solórzano et al., 2000; Sue et al., 2007), and contribute to the minority's marginalization and domination (Carter, 2007; Douds & Hout, 2020; Sue et al., 2009; Williams et al., 2021).

Conceptualizing microaggressions

Recently, microaggression research has attracted criticism. In particular, the criteria for identifying acts as microaggressive have been questioned. For example, the category of 'microassault' refers to rather explicit prejudicial acts (e.g. name calling), which means their designation as 'micro' is inappropriate: they are manifestly problematic (Freeman & Stewart, 2021; Lilienfeld, 2017; Wong et al., 2014). More strikingly, the negativity of the more subtle acts categorized as microinsults and microinvalidations has been questioned. Thus, Thomas (2008) argues that questions as to where one was born (judged by microaggression researchers to communicate that one is an alien in one's own land) cannot be assumed to be necessarily problematic: such a question could have several motivations and may not manifest negative treatment based on one's group membership (Harris, 2008; Lilienfeld, 2017; Thomas, 2008). In turn, critics have complained that psychological concepts relating to discrimination have become too inclusive, problematizing an array of behaviours too widely (Haidt, 2016). Indeed, some have complained the microaggression concept has little analytic utility (Cantu & Jussim, 2021) and contributes to a 'victimhood culture' that weakens individuals and stifles debate (Campbell & Manning, 2014; Lukianoff & Haidt, 2018).

In response, some researchers sympathetic to the concept have proposed shifting from an act-based approach (in which particular acts are defined as microaggressive) to an approach which more explicitly centres on recipients' experiences (Freeman & Stewart, 2021). Our group memberships are psychologically important (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and provide frames of reference for our interpretation of events and experiences (Reicher & Hopkins, 2016). Moreover, minority group members are particularly sensitive to what they believe majority group members (who typically have more power) think about them (Lammers et al., 2008) and must navigate the discomfort stemming from being stereotyped and misjudged (Schmader et al., 2008; Steele et al., 2002). Accordingly, focusing on minority group members' interactional experiences makes it harder to dismiss the significance of majority group members' everyday behaviours. Rather, our analytic attention is drawn to the ongoing meaning making that minority group members must engage in as they seek to interpret their interactions and manage their identity performances (Hopkins et al., 2007; Hopkins & Greenwood, 2013).

Another reason for focusing on minority group members' experiences is that a greater understanding of these may allow the development of taxonomies of experience (rather than taxonomies of acts) that help elaborate on the different harms minorities experience. For example, one hurt is the pain of misrecognition, that is, a mismatch between how one defines oneself and how one is viewed by another (Amer, 2020; Hopkins & Blackwood, 2011). Close attention to the different experiences of misrecognition may allow taxonomic insight into the varied ways in which majority group members' behaviour towards minorities can be experienced negatively (Ryan et al., 2023). For example, sometimes the invisibility of one's minority identity (as when one's distinctive needs as a minority group member are overlooked) may be experienced negatively. However, at other times, the hypervisibility of that identity (such that one is only ever seen in terms of this identity) can be experienced negatively (as one's other identities are overlooked). That both an identity's invisibility and its hypervisibility can be experienced negatively is not a contradiction implying analytic imprecision. Instead, it illustrates the importance of appreciating minority group members' vantage points and how their meaning making and identity concerns are contextually determined (Ryan et al., 2023).

Minority Identities and the experience of microaggressions

Much microaggression research addresses acts impacting racialized minorities in the United States, for example, Black Americans (Feagin, 1991; Keith et al., 2017; Lamont et al., 2016; Torres et al., 2010), Latinx Americans (e.g. Zambrana et al., 2017), Asian Americans (Sue et al., 2007) and multiracial individuals (Nadal et al., 2013). Other research addresses acts towards women (e.g. Capodilupo et al., 2010; Sue, 2010a), members of the LGBTQ+ community (e.g. Nadal et al., 2011) and people with disabilities (Keller & Galgay, 2010). Across all these samples, we see the power of majority group members to act on the basis of their stereotypes and make them count in the lives of others. This helps explain how even apparently positive feedback can be problematic, for example, complementing Latinx Americans (in a surprised manner) for their achievements reproduces the stereotyping of the group as incompetent (Zambrana et al., 2017). Indeed, even apparently positive stereotypes of a minority can be experienced negatively if they curtail the group's autonomy in self-definition (Dobai & Hopkins, 2021). By implication, what counts as microaggressive likely varies for different groups, with the same act being experienced differently depending on its alignment with how the minority believes their group is stereotyped (Wong et al., 2014) and how they self-define. Again, this underlines the importance of taking seriously the vantage point of the minority. They, rather than majority group members (and researchers), are best placed to speak on their experience of majority group members' behaviour (Phillips & Lowery, 2018). In the research reported here, we focus on the experiences of a specific community in a particular social context: Roma in Hungary.

Roma

Roma constitute the largest minority group in Europe, with an estimated population of 10–12 million (FRA: European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2014), living mainly in East-Central and South-East Europe and constituting 4%–7% of the Hungarian population (Kertesi & Kézdi, 2011). Historically, Roma have been depicted as a racialized Other threatening the national community (culminating in the *Porajmos* or Roma Holocaust, 1939–1945). This definition of Roma as an alien presence threatening Europe's civilized order (Loveland & Popescu, 2016) continues. It is manifested in anti-Roma attitudes (Csepeli et al., 2000; Csepeli & Simon, 2004; Kende et al., 2017; Zick et al., 2008) and discrimination in education, employment and housing (FRA: European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights), 2014; Rorke & Matache, 2019).

There can be extreme forms of anti-Roma prejudice (accentuated by right-wing populist politics: Tremlett & Messing, 2015; Vidra & Fox, 2014). However, expressing extreme prejudice can be inhibited by social norms with the corollary that it is not always crudely expressed but can be manifested more subtly, even in apparently liberal media (van Baar, 2014) and policy documents (Popoviciu & Tileagă, 2020). In the public sphere, Roma can experience explicit hostility. However, given normative constraints on such behaviour, they also receive less explicitly hostile treatment, which nevertheless can be experienced as signalling they are out of place and do not fully belong in the wider community (Tileagă, 2015). For example, in retail outlets, Roma are subject to surveillance premised on their characterization as uncivilized and morally suspect. As accessing public space without one's identity being compromised is key to one's everyday citizenship (Blackwood et al., 2013, 2015; Painter & Philo, 1995), such routine practices are clearly socially and politically relevant.

Our research focuses on Roma experiences of their misrecognition as potential thieves when shopping. We seek to document the nature of such experiences (including capturing real-life encounters on film). In turn, we seek to dissect participants' deliberations as to the nature of their encounters and how they should respond (considerations that majority group members likely have little cause to entertain). Investigating the nature and implications of such experiences is essential if we are to appreciate both the analytic value of the microaggression concept and how Roma are made to feel outside the social and moral order (on such exclusion, see Tileagă, 2007).

METHODS

Given the importance of adopting the vantage point of minority group members, our research was co-produced with members of the Roma community in a three-phase project. Phase 1 involved in-depth interviews which identified the contexts where Roma experienced painful encounters. Phase 2 involved creating short films capturing naturally occurring (real-life) examples of the encounters identified in the interviews. Phase 3 involved focus group discussions around the films, generating wider discussion of the Roma experience of such encounters. In every phase, participants gave their informed consent. The research received ethical approval from ELTE Eötvös Lorand University (number: 2019/239).

Phase 1: Preliminary interviews

The aim of the interviews conducted in Phase 1 was to understand the contexts and interactional dynamics impacting participants' everyday experiences.

Participants

We interviewed 17 Roma (9 men, 8 women, aged 22–46) recruited via an NGO supporting Roma and via personal contacts. Participants were contacted through email or phone. Most had a middle-class background (6 were performing artists, and 10 had university degrees or were studying at university).

Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted online in Hungarian by four non-Roma authors (three females, one male) of this paper. Interviews took between 28 and 63 min. Questions addressed their everyday experiences, including scenarios where they experienced surveillance (see Table 1). Each interview was transcribed.

TABLE 1 Personal interview and focus group interview questions.

Illustrative questions for Phase 1 interviews
1. When you think about your daily life, how much do you experience being watched or monitored in some way?
2. When and where do you most often experience such observation?
3. Under what circumstances do you notice this observation/monitoring? What is this experience like?
4. Does this experience affect your behaviour?
5. In our research, people from Budapest will record their everyday experiences through observation. What are the typical places/situations to focus on?
Illustrative questions for Phase 3 focus groups
After watching the film
1. What do you think happened in the previous scenes?
2. Have you ever had a similar experience? How did you react?
3. Are these typical experiences for Hungarian Roma?
4. What do you think of the person who treated the Roma individual in this way? What was their motivation?
5. How does all this affect your Hungarian and/or Roma identity?

Analysis

Two researchers independently read the interviews and identified examples of encounters reported as involving overt or subtle forms of discrimination. They compared extracts in an iterative manner to identify interactions participants judged as particularly significant. Attention focused on their locations (e.g. bars and shops), the encounters' forms and participants' accounts of their experience. Frequently discussed encounters concerned accessing bars and clubs, housing and retail settings. Here, we focus on encounters in retail settings and present quotes capturing key elements of such experiences.

Our first quote gives some sense of the degree to which microaggressions permeate everyday encounters in public places:

Extract 1

> In my mind, it's everywhere; it's burnt into me by so many experiences that, unfortunately, people are still prejudiced. So I experience it everywhere: when I go to the beach or a restaurant, to shopping malls, or even at a parking lot where I've parked; it's with me everywhere as a subtle fear.
>
> (Male, 27, town, university degree)

This conveys the ever-present sense of vulnerability to microaggressive behaviour and notes the significance of interactions experienced in retail settings. Our second extract helps explain the significance of such shopping-related encounters:

Extract 2

> They [security staff] turn and look at me or follow me, and it's a very uncomfortable feeling. It's a feeling that even if I want to buy something, I get so discouraged that I don't. (…) Yes, it makes me think I have to show I belong in this store. And that's why I buy many things that I don't even need, but I buy them to show I have a place in the store.
>
> (Female, 25, town, university degree)

This conveys the clear sense of discomfort associated with surveillance and the participant's felt need to prove their legitimate belonging in the store through performing their identity as a genuine customer (even to the extent of purchasing items not actually needed).

Our third extract highlights the subtle ways in which one's treatment can communicate suspicion about one's presence. Specifically, the interviewe explains experiencing the (apparently helpful) shop assistant's question 'Can I help you?' as questioning the legitimacy of their presence:

Extract 3

> There are or have always been situations where if I go into a small shop and look around, the question is, "Can I help you?" but it isn't like that. It's not like he really wants to help because he sees that I'm looking for something, it's more like, "What are you doing here? Why are you looking around?"
>
> (Male, 26, town, university degree)

Together, these extracts reveal something of the Roma shopping experience: their surveillance, their felt need to prove the legitimacy of their presence through choreographing an identity performance and their interpretation of even apparently helpful encounters as actually deeply problematic. Indeed, there is good reason to construe the question 'Can I help you?' as microaggressive, in that it is not explicitly hostile or racist, yet is experienced as signalling one is out of place.

Phase 2: Filming minority–majority encounters

In Phase 2, we captured on film naturally occurring, real-life examples of the experiences identified as hurtful in Phase 1. Ten participants from Phase 1 (5 males, 5 females, aged 19 to 28, 4 from the capital, 4 from medium-sized cities and 2 from small towns) documented their daily experiences of discrimination using body-worn cameras. The filming was not staged or scripted but entailed a participant-led method of gaining recordings of actual interactions. Participants had the freedom to record at their discretion across various social settings (including different retail spaces). Three films were created from the gathered footage showcasing (respectively) participants' experiences while trying to enter nightclubs, securing rental accommodation and shopping. To preserve anonymity, the faces of shop assistants and passers-by featured in the films were blurred.

Participants were also interviewed by the filmmakers, and extracts from these interviews were included in the films. This allowed participants to voice their interpretations and the emotions associated with their filmed encounters. The filmmakers' role was to support the participants' narration of their stories, not to direct or shape the scenarios. This helped preserve the authenticity and integrity of the participants' captured experiences.

The overtness of the discriminatory treatment in the films varied. It was most direct in those concerning nightclub entry and apartment rental. It was less so in the film concerning shopping. This latter included footage of a shop assistant observing and engaging with two participants in a larger department store and captured the experience reported in our Phase 1 interviews concerning the way shop assistants quickly attend to Roma shoppers, asking, 'Can I help you?'. Specifically, this film showed a light-skinned Roma shopper exploring perfumes without attracting any attention. It then showed a Roma couple (a man and a woman) with darker skin (and so more obviously Roma) being immediately approached by a sales assistant offering 'help' and handling the perfume for them.

At first sight, such an encounter could be judged as quality customer care. However, it was interpreted by the Roma filmmakers very differently. When interviewed (in the film), one explained:

> The lady asked me if she could help me, and when I told her "no, I'm just looking", she didn't leave me alone to look. She kept "helping" me, she was very helpful. I couldn't even pick up a sample on my own. She was the one taking the perfume off the shelf and spraying it on the tester, smelling it, then giving it to me. While I was in the store, she was there with me the entire time.

Analytically, the point is that their treatment can be seen as microaggressive. It is not overtly hostile but constitutes a subtle form of social control that is in keeping with social norms against the direct expression of prejudice but which marks one as out of place.

More generally, these films provide much-needed documentary evidence of the way Roma are treated and help corroborate their verbal reports of such encounters. They can be accessed here: https://osf.io/ptgdu/?view_only=0f0f32da180b4330ab320eb782896793.

Phase 3: Focus group data

In the final phase, we presented the films to a wider range of Roma participants in focus groups to gauge identification with the depicted scenarios and prompt detailed exploration of their own experiences. The content gathered from these sessions forms the basis for our analysis of their shopping-related experiences.

Participants

Twenty-four Roma participated in six focus groups (male = 10, female = 14, age = 18–62). They were recruited via an NGO addressing Roma issues in the countryside. Our collaboration with the NGO helped build participants' trust and allowed access to participants with varying degrees of social capital (see Table 2 for participants' identification codes and demographics). This sample is not demographically representative but broader than most studies (see Dobai & Hopkins, 2020, whose sample is skewed towards urban-based activists). Our analysis is not intended to generalize the frequency with which Roma experience microaggressive treatment. Rather, it is organized to allow a more in-depth exploration of participants' everyday shopping experiences and the complex meaning making that participants must engage in.

Focus groups

We chose focus group interviews over one-to-one interviews because they can further empower participants to shape the agenda for discussion. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, the groups met online. They were conducted in Hungarian by three of this paper's authors (two female and one male non-Roma Hungarian) and typically lasted approximately 90 minutes. Discussion of the film dealing with shopping focused on participants' interpretation of the interactions depicted and their

TABLE 2 Phase 3 participants' demographics.

Participant	Focus group	Sex	Age	Living location	Education
1	1	M	26	Town	University (ongoing)
2	1	M	38	Village	Elementary school
3	1	F	52	Village	University (ongoing)
4	1	F	21	Village	University (ongoing)
5	2	F	25	Town	Vocational school
6	2	M	19	Town	University (ongoing)
7	2	M	46	Village	University
8	3	M	43	Town (small)	University
9	3	M	20	Town	University (ongoing)
10	3	M	40	Village	University
11	3	F	38	Village	Vocational school
12	4	M	24	Town (small)	University
13	4	F	40	Town (small)	Elementary school
14	4	F	18	Village (small)	High school (ongoing)
15	5	M	19	Village	Vocational school
16	5	F	40	Village	Vocational school
17	5	F	41	Town	Vocational school
18	5	F	21	Town	High school (ongoing)
19	5	F	19	Town	High school (ongoing)
20	6	M	22	Town	University (ongoing)
21	6	F	18	Village	Vocational school
22	6	F	42	Village	Vocational school
23	6	F	38	Village	Vocational school
24	6	F	62	Village	Vocational school

own shopping experiences (see questions in Table 1). The research was approved by the ethics committee of ELTE Eötvös Lorand University (approval number: 2020/196). As our transcripts may allow participants to be identified, these are not publicly available (but the authors can be contacted to discuss the data).

Analytic approach

Our inductive, thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021) involved reading and re-reading transcriptions of the focus group discussions. As our readings progressed, we sought to dissect participants' accounts of their surveillance-related experiences. Extracts concerning these experiences and the sense-making considerations that they required were iteratively compared. Our reading of these data was anchored in social psychological research concerning minorities' microaggressive treatment and the additional concerns minorities experience in everyday life, for example, concerning their identity performances. Accordingly, the researchers' perspective is not to be construed as contributing bias but as a valuable asset in developing an analytic reading of our participants' experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Below, we explore participants' broad understanding of their everyday shopping experiences. First, we report the way in which the filmed encounters of surveillance (including the query 'Can I help you?') resonated with participants. Second, we report participants' sense making of such treatment. Specifically, we dissect the complex considerations participants reported concerning how to manage such encounters. Here, we identified three broad experiential dimensions. The first concerned the emotional dimension of their misrecognition and the dilemmas this posed for their response. The second concerned participants' weighing of the strategic considerations relevant to how they thought they should respond in such encounters. The third concerned participants' interpretative experiences of such scenarios. Differentiating these three dimensions of experience helps explain the additional complexities Roma face when shopping. Following good practice, our analysis is grounded in multiple extracts (Elliott, 1999). Omitted text is signalled with ellipses (…). Text within brackets [] clarifies meaning.

Analysis

The significance of everyday surveillance

Participants repeatedly referred to their experience of surveillance. Sometimes, this was manifested in their being physically followed by security guards: as one explained, 'If I go shopping not where I live but in a bigger city, I always get a "security service" following me' (P8). Sometimes, it was manifested in the looks they received:

Extract 4

> (…) as soon as I walk in, they look at me like that, no matter how I'm dressed or how much money I have with me. It wouldn't even matter if I showed them a load of money at the desk.
>
> (P2)

Others explained suspicion was manifested in apparently benign offers of help:

Extract 5

> I want to add that this phrase "Can I help you?" isn't just a question; what's behind it is more about surveillance. We don't know why, whether he decided to do it on his own or he was told to keep an eye on us. But I don't think it matters anyway because it's still

> discrimination. So I got really furious, and I showed him the cash in my wallet, I mean it's outrageous, you know? How are we expected to look at these situations?
>
> (P3)

Indeed, another explained that the hurt of this apparent helpfulness was such that they felt they had to leave the shop immediately:

Extract 6

> ***P14:*** (…) we went to the shopping centre, and we went into a bit more expensive shop to look around, then the shop assistant came asking what I would like… I can't even look around the shop because they think I'm stealing!
> ***Int:*** Yes, so this extreme helpfulness?
> ***P14:*** Yes, this happens, so… I left the shop right away because it's impossible to look around because they believe I only came to steal something. (P14)

These extracts confirm the degree to which the interactions depicted in the film were not idiosyncratic but resonated with our participants. Furthermore, they underscore the importance of viewing these interactions from the minority's vantage point. Such understandings need to be taken seriously: the pain of one's misrecognition as a potential thief (rather than a valued customer) contributes to the experience of being judged unwelcome in what is (supposedly) a public space (such that some feel the need to exit immediately).

In the next section, we explore the significance of such treatment for participants' understanding of how they could and should act. Specifically, we dissect the varied and complex deliberations such treatment prompted.

Experiencing surveillance

The emotional dimension

The psychological significance of surveillance was clearly apparent in participants' accounts of their emotional responses. Inevitably, these varied according to the nature of the encounter and the sense of injustice it prompted. Thus, one, referring to the presence of a security guard, explained that their reaction depended on the level of intrusion:

Extract 7

> If they weren't following me, but just watching me, like whether I'm ducking around a corner or something, and if that made me really angry, I think I would just leave. If it didn't make me that angry, I would just buy what I needed and then go.
>
> (P4)

This same participant elaborated on the impact of being upset by her surveillance:

Extract 8

> …but if the security guard followed me or something like that, I would avoid an argument. I wouldn't approach him or say anything to him, but if I really got upset, I would just take what I came to buy from my basket, put it back on the shelf and leave. I don't think I'd get into a conversation with him.
>
> (P4)

Three features of this participant's experience are noteworthy. First, the potential for a strong emotional reaction in such an everyday context. Second, a reluctance to engage with those involved in their

surveillance (such that she would rather exit). Third, her exit without buying what she wanted ('I would take what I come to buy from my basket, put it back and leave'). Analytically, the key point is that these features of the Roma shopping experience turn what for majority group members is an unremarkable activity in the public realm into an emotionally charged encounter. Indeed, it can be so aversive that they self-exclude from public space.

One reason for participants' reluctance to question their treatment was that such a response would be dismissed because accusations of surveillance can be easily denied. P13 put it in these terms:

Extract 9

> You don't react because it's just going to be annoying. They'll say it's a coincidence [that they followed you], so you can't really say anything back, but you're annoyed, so I'd rather just get out of the store, or—I don't know, but it's really annoying.
>
> (P13)

Thus far, we have seen participants reporting both strong emotional reactions to their treatment and a sense that contesting such treatment was difficult. Indeed, such deniability ('They'll say it's a coincidence') contributed further to the emotional hurt of surveillance ('You don't react because it's just going to be annoying').

How best to manage such cumulative emotional hurt raised significant dilemmas. Take, for example, P3's reflections on how to manage one's emotions. On the one hand, she spoke of the self-defeating cost of getting angry at one's treatment. Indeed, reflecting on the potentially corrosive effects of such anger, she argued one must accept such treatment:

Extract 10

> You can't let yourself get wrapped up in it, you can get used to it because if we get too wrapped up in it, it will damage our souls. But I'm Christian, so I view this [problem] very differently.
>
> (P3)

Yet, at the same time, she was alert to the painful cost of such acceptance. Specifically, she explained that although a calm acceptance could help manage one's emotions, the consequence was that one would be exposed to numerous instances of prejudicial treatment and that this cumulative sense of injustice would itself be emotionally corrosive:

Extract 11

> I think sometimes it's good to tell them and make it clear that we're not in the store to steal something, to make that clear to the ones that are constantly following us and, like, mentally harassing us. Just because we're Roma, we're not there to steal, but to buy things, because we have money. Sometimes it's better to confront people than to just leave and then start thinking about it and get really upset that it happened here yet again, and it happens because we have brown skin.
>
> (P3)

These last two quotes from the same individual convey something of the dilemmatic complexity of the Roma shopping experience. Just as it may be beneficial to avoid thinking too much about one's experience because 'we will hurt our souls' (Extract 10), so acceptance of one's treatment means one finds oneself leaving the shop (again), feeling 'upset' (again) and knowing it happened (again) 'because we have brown skin'. That is, participants had to manage the dilemma of knowing that just as confrontation could be painful, so too could acquiescence. Such emotional considerations and calculations are important and contribute to an aversive experience of occupying public space in ways that majority group members rarely face (and research must address).

The strategic dimension

A second dimension of participants' experience concerned the need to weigh wider strategic considerations concerning how to respond to the questioning of their moral character and presence. For example, several argued that challenging one's treatment could reproduce (rather than contest) the characterization of Roma as a problematic, uncivilized Other. Participant 2 argued:

Extract 12

> You shouldn't always confront the security guard either because that's also a stereotype about the Roma, that they are hot-headed, that they get upset very easily, because they see that they are followed, and then they react differently (…) There is an image of us, a kind of attitude that people like us will misbehave. No! If possible, one should restrain themselves and try to deal with it in another way. (…) You must present yourself differently. Some choose that option, ask a question and display "normal" behaviour.
>
> (P2)

Again, this highlights a dilemma: to assert one's moral standing and legitimate presence was important, but explicit contestation could easily be interpreted as confirming the very image they wished to contest. In turn, the participant advocated presenting oneself as a customer through displaying 'normal' behaviour, which they continued to explain required politely asking for help: 'if you notice that they are keeping an eye on you, you can also go up to them and ask them, "Can you please help me?"' (P2). In a similar vein, another explained:

Extract 13

> I steer the situation in a different direction and ask them how their day was or whether a lot of people buy this product. I neutralise the situation because they can't pay that much attention to which product I choose or which one I like because there are other people in the store.
>
> (P16)

What is particularly interesting in this extract is the way in which the participant spoke of trying to 'neutralize' the interaction through engaging in polite everyday talk (e.g. asking about the guard's day) and asking questions (e.g. 'Do other people buy this product?') such that the guard was drawn into more everyday conversations. That is, the participant reports self-consciously engaging in an identity performance which steers the guard away from focusing on the participant as a potential thief. First, the conversation about the product's characteristics is organized to invite the guard to treat the participant as a potential customer. Second, the participant reports calculating a limit as to how much the guard can engage in such 'normal' conversation which diminishes their capacity to observe others (such that they move on and leave the participant alone). The felt need to engage in such self-conscious identity performances which claim recognition of their identity as customers (and the legitimacy of their place in the shop) is significant. The need to calculate how one's responses could either challenge or confirm stereotypes and how to choreograph the performance of 'normality' are typically alien to majority group shoppers and need to be acknowledged as significant features of minority group members' everyday lives.

It is also appropriate to note that even if successful, such performances of 'normality' likely do little to dispel the stereotype of Roma as an untrustworthy Other. Perhaps the best that can be achieved is the sense that one is an exception to the rule. Describing such an encounter, one explained how when followed by a guard:

Extract 14

> I counteracted it by grabbing an item and then going up to him and asking him to tell me something about it and asking how I could find more info about it. And then he stopped

> following me; he didn't come after me because he saw that I wasn't that kind of person, not the kind of Roma that needs to be followed.
>
> (P17)

Moreover, even such achievements cannot be guaranteed: some observed that any success may be limited in the sense that only the more intrusive forms of surveillance are reduced. Take, for example, this account of managing the 'over-helpfulness' extended to Roma when shopping:

Extract 15

> Many of them are like this; when a Roma enters right away they ask whether they can help, so I have experienced this over-helpfulness, but I think if you're pretty explicit, you don't shout, but you say, "Hi, thank you very much, but I'm just looking around", then I think they understand, then they can watch you from a distance, but they definitely won't be right there next to you.
>
> (P12)

In other words, one's polite response may win a little space, but one is still likely to be watched 'from a distance'. The wider point here is that not only must Roma weigh a series of strategic considerations regarding their responses to surveillance but they must also engage with the reality that whatever they do, they are likely to have little control over the encounter.

The interpretative dimension

A third dimension of our participants' experience concerned their in-the-moment decision-making as to how they should act. For example, although participants were clear their experiences were shaped by anti-Roma prejudice, they also reported scenarios in which the relevance of their Roma identity for their treatment required interpretation. For example, one reflected on her experience of being followed by a guard while shopping with non-Roma friends:

Extract 16

> When I was with others, I was waiting for them while they were shopping, if I remember well, I also bought something. We paid and left. After that, we talked about him and why he was following us, but we couldn't figure it out. We still don't know, probably not because I was Roma and I was with them. Because when they went inside, he was watching them, too.
>
> (P4)

Such extracts illustrate the interpretative work involved in coming to a judgement concerning the basis for one's treatment (and hence, how one should react). Moreover, although concluding this particular surveillance was 'probably not because I was Roma', it is clear the encounter was a topic for discussion, and its potential relevance intruded on their shopping experience (such that they spent time discussing it).

It is also noteworthy that even when participants were clear their treatment was based on their Roma identity, the need for a quick in-the-moment response could be challenging. Thus, referring to scenarios in which non-Roma others had 'overstepped' what was reasonable, one described the difficulty of deciding how to respond in a timely manner. More specifically, reflecting on strategies open to them, they explained:

Extract 17

> I don't really think about these strategies if someone doesn't overstep their authority. For me, based on my experience, when something like that happens it's very sudden, and I cannot react in a way that's proactive; I feel like I always fail.
>
> (P1)

Again, this illustrates the complexity of the Roma shopping experience. In encounters where the other has the power to shape the course of the encounter, one can find oneself unable to interpret how best to manage the interaction. In turn, one is forever caught out and frustrated in proactively managing the interaction such that the experience is doubly negative. Not only is one subject to treatment that is judged negatively, but one experiences a strong sense of failure ('I feel like I always fail').

DISCUSSION

Minorities experience explicitly discriminatory acts. They also experience more subtle forms of discriminatory treatment captured by the concept of microaggressions. Given recent criticisms of this concept's utility (Cantu & Jussim, 2021; Harris, 2008; Lilienfeld, 2017; Thomas, 2008), we have sought to show the significance of the everyday encounters Roma experience in retail settings. We have focused on their vantage point and, in doing so, tried to dissect the complex considerations they must engage with as they go through the apparently mundane business of shopping. We believe this contributes towards a taxonomy of experience that illuminates the impact of majority group members' behaviour (Freeman & Stewart, 2021).

Drawing on the interviews conducted in Phase 1, we identified contexts in which Roma reported experiencing everyday prejudicial treatment. Some treatments were explicitly discriminatory (e.g. being excluded from a nightclub or being refused an apartment rental). Others were more apparently benign – such as the shop assistant's query 'Can I help you?'. Having identified examples of more subtle discriminatory treatment, our participants (Phase 2) gathered filmed real-life (naturally occurring) evidence of the way Roma shoppers are treated when shopping. In turn, in Phase 3, we were able to use this footage to elicit focus group discussions that allowed us to more fully dissect the significance of such attention.

Analysing the Phase 3 data, we identified three broad dimensions (emotional, strategic and interpretative) to the experience ofc surveillance. Each of these involved considerations that participants had to weigh which made their shopping experiences different from others. First, participants reported significant emotional experiences. Such emotions were both bound up with their surveillance and with their responses to that surveillance. This makes the point that when shopping, participants must navigate a complex set of considerations concerning their emotions: both confronting one's treatment and acquiescing could have negative emotional implications. Second, participants reported complex calculations as to the strategic implications of any response. Of particular note were their considerations regarding the risks of an angry response confirming the stereotype of Roma as uncivilized and the work involved in calmly presenting oneself as 'normal' and a genuine customer. Yet again, this illustrates considerations that majority group members likely have little routine need to engage with. It also underscores the point that a lack of response should not be assumed as implying no hurt was incurred: sometimes strategic considerations could result in hurt being suffered in silence. Third, participants reflected on the complexity involved in interpreting their treatment. Here, we saw that even if the outcome was the conclusion that one's Roma identity was irrelevant to one's treatment, the process of interpretation could permeate one's shopping experience. Furthermore, we saw the challenges of responding in the moment when interacting with another who had more power to shape the nature and course of the interaction. In many ways, these three dimensions of experience all relate to the challenges and dilemmas participants encountered when deciding how to manage and negotiate others' power to define their identity (Amer & Obradovic, 2022) and their place in public (Tileagă, 2015).

Needless to say, our analysis does not exhaust the considerations and dilemmas that Roma must engage with. Nor do we make any assumptions about the frequency with which particular concerns arise. In these respects, further research is required. However, with such caveats in mind, our analysis sheds some light on the painful experiences associated with our participants' routine misrecognition (Ryan et al., 2023). First, their identities as Roma are hyper-salient. Second, the nature of this identification is misleadingly stereotyped with the corollary that rather than being oriented to, as potential customers, their moral character and their place in public space are questioned. Third, with regard to their own

behaviour, they face the task of weighing all the emotional, strategic and interpretative considerations described above. Sometimes, these may lead to the contestation of their misrecognition, sometimes to acquiescence.

Regarding our research strategy, it is important to note that although no Roma researchers were involved in the interpretation of the Phase 3 data and the writing of this paper, the involvement of Roma participants in the Phase 2 filming of real-life shopping encounters allowed us to redress some of the power imbalances involved in research with marginalized communities (and thus more effectively centre on their everyday experiences). Indeed, we learned much from those Roma involved in documenting the 'over-helpfulness' directed to Roma about its significance for them. Moreover, in Phase 3, we successfully recruited a relatively hard-to-reach sample of participants from small and disadvantaged Roma villages and settlements, and the focus group format allowed for engaged debate among those who might otherwise find research intimidating.

As to the future, further effort could be devoted to the co-production of research. While the current study took significant steps in this direction (with Roma participants filming naturally occurring encounters they considered relevant), future research could more formally include minority group members in the process of data analysis. This could have further grounded the research in the perspectives of our participants and mitigated unacknowledged biases associated with having majority group member analysts. Also, future research could include representatives from the retail sector. Although the treatment of Roma when shopping may be shaped by shop workers' individual beliefs, it is also likely a function of organizational culture, and including representatives of the retail sector in the research process could allow greater understanding of how organizational practice (e.g. surveillance) is organized to construct space and place so that some obtain the privileges of belonging (Crevani, 2019) and others are marginalized (Antonsich, 2010; Gieryn, 2000).

However, if these issues are for the future, we believe there is merit in retaining the concept of microaggressions. Given the issues involved in generating generic taxonomies of microaggressive acts, the call to more thoroughly dissect minority group members' experiences (Freeman & Stewart, 2021) is important. Our dissection of the emotional, strategic and interpretative experiences reported here highlights the complexity of minority group members' sense making of their everyday encounters (including those critics of the microaggression concept may easily assume are benign, e.g. a shop assistant's apparent helpfulness). We would add that a focus on minorities' experiences (rather than listing specific acts) is important because prejudice can be practiced through all manner of context-specific social and discursive practices (Tileagă, 2006) that likely preclude simple taxonomic listing. Based on the analysis reported here, we would contend that the query 'Can I help you?' can be experienced as microaggressive. Moreover, we would argue that understanding minorities' microaggressive experiences can inform our understanding of the informal micropolitics of place construction (Di Masso, 2015; Dixon & Durrheim, 2000) and how people come to sense who belongs where and on what terms (Gieryn, 2000). Such experiences are key to people's wider sense of their societal belonging and citizenship (Painter & Philo, 1995; Stevenson et al., 2015; Tileagă, 2015).

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Boglarka Nyul: Conceptualization; methodology; data curation; investigation; formal analysis; project administration; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing. **Anna Kende:** Conceptualization; data curation; formal analysis; investigation; methodology; funding acquisition; supervision; writing – review and editing. **József Pántya:** Conceptualization; data curation; formal analysis; investigation; methodology; project administration; writing – review and editing. **Luca Váradi:** Investigation; methodology; project administration; writing – review and editing. **Jeremy Braverman:** Investigation; methodology; writing – review and editing. **Ádám Hushegyi:** Investigation; methodology. **Sára Csaba:** Data curation; formal analysis. **Nóra Anna Lantos:** Investigation; formal analysis. **Nick Hopkins:** Conceptualization; formal analysis; investigation; methodology; funding acquisition; supervision; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

As these data comprise interviews and contain information that might identify the participants, the data are not publicly available. However, interested parties may contact the authors to discuss the data and analysis. Videos produced during Phase 2 can be found on OSF (https://osf.io/ptgdu/?view_only=0f0f32da180b4330ab320eb782896793).

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